

The impact of COVID-19 on families with children in our community

Children and families benefit when they are surrounded by protective factors (or positive supports) that can reduce the effects of stressful life events.^{2,1}

COVID-19 affects every single one of us

The COVID-19 pandemic has wide-reaching effects on all aspects of our work, family, and social lives. We all experience and cope with the COVID-19 pandemic in our own way.

Things are in flux, and the way we experience and are affected by the pandemic changes as the measures put in place to protect against COVID-19 and the situations we find ourselves in change.

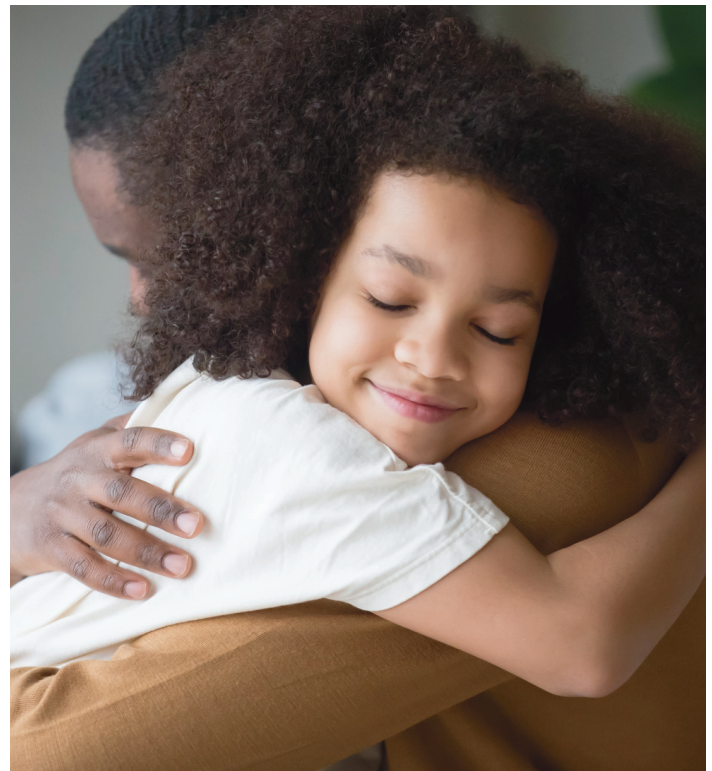
The Vital Focus series examines the impacts of measures to control COVID-19 on health and wellbeing in our community. This report focuses on how families and children were affected by the pandemic during the initial phases of the pandemic, when schools were closed and many child care options were limited (including formal child care and summer camps).

Keeping children safe and healthy



A nurturing relationship with at least one supportive adult is the most important **protective factor** for children to develop resilience and do well despite experiencing adversity.^{2,5,2,6} Some other protective factors that can help families with children include:^{2,7,2,8,2,9,2,10,2,11,2,12}

- Positive social networks
- Adequate housing and income
- Access to services
- Access to extracurricular activities
- Self-regulation or being able to manage emotions
- Problem-solving skills
- Consistent routines and expectations



A nurturing and supportive relationship with at least one supportive adult is the most important protective factor for a child's well being.

How has COVID-19 affected families with children?

- The pandemic has the potential to increase risk factors (negative experiences) and decrease protective factors for all families.^{2,13}
- Some families will face challenges that are new to them and they may access community organizations and support for the first time.
- For some families, the pandemic could have a disproportionately negative effect on their health and wellbeing, for example, families that are struggling to make ends meet, socially isolated families, newcomer and immigrant families, or families facing racism.^{2,13, 2,39, 2,40, 2,42}



During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents have struggled to balance the competing demands of work, remote learning, and their family's needs.

Many families with children have been affected by the pandemic

Results of various surveys that collected information from Canadian parents, Ontario parents and caregivers, and Guelph families*, as well as international sources, like the World Health Organization, suggest that the initial measures put in place to manage the pandemic, including school closures, were not easy for parents, caregivers or children.

- Parents were struggling to balance the competing demands of work, remote learning and their children's needs.^{2.15, 2.26, 2.41}
- Children were socializing less and feeling isolated.^{2.26}
- Many parents and caregivers experienced depression and anxiety.^{2.41}
- Children's **mental health** was affected.^{2.26, 2.31}
- Some parents were **drinking more alcohol**.^{2.41}
- There was increased risk for family violence due to factors like isolation, lack of privacy when using social media, the internet, or making phone calls, no opportunity to take a break from home (e.g., at school, library, place of worship etc.), and increase in alcohol use at home.^{2.22, 2.23}
- Initially, reports of child abuse and neglect decreased. This decrease has been attributed to decreased contact between

children and schools and community programs, that are often reporting sources for suspected abuse or neglect.^{2.43, 2.48}

- There were concerns about the amount of time children were spending on screens, including an increased risk of children's exposure to "cyberbullying, risky online behavior and sexual exploitation" for children.^{2.26, 2.22}
- Routines and expectations, which can help children feel secure and stable were disrupted when schools and child care centres closed.^{2.32, 2.35}
- The risk of **food insecurity** increased due to significant decreases in or loss of income.^{2.38}

Some families reported positive experiences

Some families:

- Had more quality time together, like preparing or eating meals together, which could strengthen relationships and attachment to caregivers and/or parents^{2.15, 2.41}
- Read books or stories or engaged in physical activity daily or almost daily^{2.26}
- Spent more time outdoors^{2.41}
- Did fun things together^{2.41}
- Had a greater appreciation for things often "taken for granted"^{2.41}



Canadian and Ontario trends

Statistics Canada collected information from 32,000 Canadian parents in June 2020 and a McMaster University-led survey collected information from 7,434 Ontario parents and caregivers in May and June 2020.

Canada

Of the Canadian parents who completed the Statistics Canada survey^{2,26}:

76%

reported feeling 'very' or 'extremely' concerned about balancing child care, work and household tasks

46%

said they were 'very' or 'extremely' concerned about their children's general mental health

64%

felt 'very' or 'extremely' concerned about the amount of time their children were spending on screens

Ontario

Of the Ontario parents who completed a survey about their experience during the initial lockdown:^{2,41}

About half

reported they were struggling to manage remote learning (48%), their children's screen time (54%), their children's anxiety and stress (48%), their child's behaviour (31%), and household routines and organization (48%)

38%

reported an increase in alcohol consumption, compared to 46% who reported no change and 17% who reported a decrease

10%

reported increased verbal or physical conflict with their spouse or partner

Local trends

In April and May, 2020, the Guelph Family Health Study asked 254 families about how COVID-19 impacted them. Of the parents who responded to the survey:^{2,15}

87%

reported that their children were spending more time on screens

22%

of mothers and 18% of fathers reported being worried they would not be able to pay the mortgage, rent or other bills on time over the next six months

50%

said children were helping with meal preparation

55%

said they were eating more meals with children



Some parents said that uncertainty related to the impact of COVID-19 on themselves, their children, their job and financial security was a stressor^{2,15}

Family & Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington

In April and May 2020, Family & Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington saw a 43% decrease in the monthly average number of referrals they received (359 referrals) when compared to the monthly average of the previous three years (633 referrals). When comparing June 2020 to the June average of the previous three years, there was a 30% decrease in referrals.^{2,43}

Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis

Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis have seen a change in people's ability to safely access crisis phone support. With the COVID-19 isolation measures, there was an increase in the amount of time that the abuser was in the home. This created a lack of privacy and limited the opportunity for women to reach out for support. They note that "Some of these support calls could only happen during specific windows of time or could get cut short because the abuser came into the room or returned home."^{2,44}

EarlyON Child and Family Centre

When the pandemic started, EarlyON Child and Family Centres quickly shifted to virtual delivery of programmes and services to continue supporting parents and caregivers of children birth to 6 years old in Guelph and Wellington. EarlyON staff are child care professionals who assist families by providing direct supports and/or by connecting families to community agencies and resources. Through a new partnership with WDG Public Health, EarlyON staff also provide virtual supports to vulnerable families with new babies.

Recommendations to support families with children

- **Support individuals, families and the community to build resilience** by reducing sources of stress (e.g., loss of income, isolation), increasing protective factors (e.g., connections to supportive adults) and strengthening important life skills (e.g., problem-solving skills).^{2,30}
- **Promote healthy behaviours**, such as outdoor time and physical activities that support good physical and mental health.^{2,45, 2,46, 2,47}
- **Keep children safe while on the internet.** Technology, telecommunication providers, and community organizations should take proactive steps (e.g., make information about free helplines available, develop safe platforms for kids) to protect children while they are online.^{2,22}
- Consult with subject matter experts and use research to ensure that measures put in place to **protect against COVID-19 take into account the potential positive or negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of children and families**.^{2,31} For example:
 - **Prioritize the unique needs of children and families who are disproportionately at-risk** of negative outcomes due the measures put in place for COVID-19. Examples include: families living in poverty, families where a parent/caregiver is struggling with a mental health or addiction issue, or families where a child has a disability; and
 - **Address barriers families will face in the implementation of some COVID-19 measures** (e.g. parental employment and the need for child care; the developmental ability of children to follow certain restrictions).
- **Simplify access to information for parents, caregivers and children** about where they can get help. And in doing so, consider barriers, such as lack of internet, language, and literacy levels.
- Ensure everyone (members of the public and professionals) understand that they are **required by law to report suspected child abuse or neglect.**

Help is available



If you or a family you know requires support or assistance, is experiencing difficulty or has concerns about safety, call **Family & Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington** at 1-800-265-8300.

If you or someone you know requires mental health, addiction or crisis support, call **HERE24/7** at 1-844-437-3247.

To access the **Women in Crisis** shelter or for support and information so you can make your own choices about safety for you and your children, call 1-800-265-7233.

To access a trained volunteer for emotional support, call **Family Counselling and Support Services for Guelph-Wellington** distress line at 1-888-821-3760 or 519-821-3760

For Walk-In/Virtual Mental Health clinics, call 519-824-2431 or 1-800-307-7078 to make an appointment. No referral required

Visit growinggreat-generations.ca for a regularly updated list of agencies, services, programs, resources, and events available for families and children in Guelph and Wellington County.

Footnotes and references are available at [Toward Common Ground](http://towardcommonground.ca).

Note: There are limitations associated with the data and research sources included in this Vital Focus. For more information about sources and citations, please go to [Toward Common Ground](http://towardcommonground.ca). If you know of research or data about diverse communities not represented in this Vital Focus, please contact us at sarahh@towardcommonground.ca

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